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# Iraq Steps Up Air War on Oil Lanes

## Targeting of Tankers, Stations Seen as Reply to Iran's Offensives

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Washington Post Foreign Service

BAGHDAD, Iraq, March 2—As Iraqi Army efforts to repulse Iranian attacks on the strategic Faw Peninsula to the south and in the mountains of the northeast have bogged down, Baghdad has claimed almost daily Air Force and Navy attacks on tankers and Iranian oil facilities along the Persian Gulf.

In the past week, Iraqi military communiques have cited rocket attacks on seven "large naval targets" and a number of smaller vessels around the Kharg Island loading facilities. Before the 5½-year-old war began, Kharg handled 90 percent of Iran's oil exports.

Gulf shipping sources have confirmed that at least four supertankers were damaged during the week. The 132,000-ton, Liberian-registered Castor reported the death of two Filipino crewmen.

Western diplomats and military observers who monitor the war from here say these attacks represent an attempt to divert the Iranians from their surprise offensives and to show their own population that Iraq, too, can hurt the enemy.

[Shipping officials quoted by Reuter said that on Sunday five warplanes thought to be Iranian bombed the Turkish tanker Atlas 1 east of Qatar, killing the ship's chief officer, in apparent retaliation.]

"The evidence is that the Iraqi Army is not prepared to pay the price in casualties necessary to dislodge the Iranians at Faw and in the mountains," said a foreign diplomat, who asked that his name and nationality not be used. "So they are again trying to put the squeeze on Iran's oil exports."

Iraq began its "tanker war" against Iran in 1984 to cut the oil income Iran needs to pay for the costly war. Western sources said that since then, attacks on shipping have averaged one to two a week. Thus, the week's confirmed attacks on four ships represent a sharp escalation.

Western officials say that more

serious than the assaults on the ships and the renewed attacks on the already much bombed Kharg Island loading terminal have been the attacks on the pumping complex at Ganaveh, on the mainland.

Past experience has shown that the Kharg Island facilities, mainly pipeline outlets of oil pumped from elsewhere in Iran through Ganaveh,

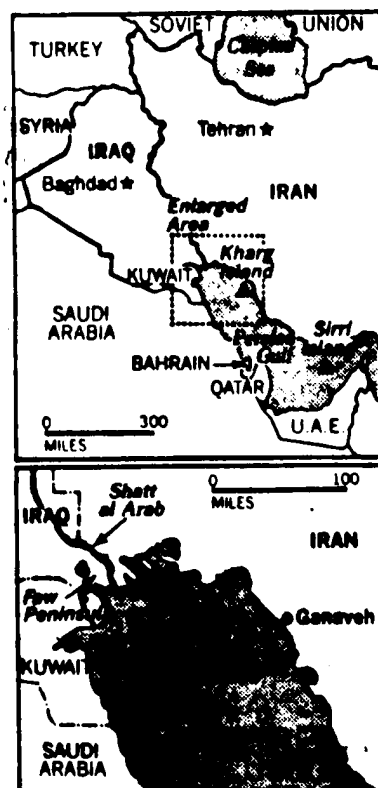
are repaired quickly after Iraqi bombings. Damaged facilities at Ganaveh, which are larger and more complex, are more difficult to repair, these officials maintain.

After a bombing of Ganaveh late in January, Iran announced that it was halving its oil shipment for 10 days. It was explained as an effort to shore up plummeting oil prices, but western officials, alluding to intelligence on the bombing at Ganaveh, say the real reason was the damage. Iran's deliveries dropped to a crippling 800,000 to 900,000 barrels a day, according to oil sources here.

Foreign officials in Baghdad said it was still too early to assess how much the new attacks have hurt Iran's ability to keep moving the 1 million barrels of oil a day that western economists maintain is the minimum Iran needs to sell.

Because of the danger to shipping around Kharg, most tanker owners refuse to load there, forcing the Iranians to pump oil through Ganaveh to Kharg, then load it on their own tankers for transport to a tiny loading facility at Sirri Island, out of range of Iraqi jets. There, it is reloaded to big ships for export to Europe or Japan.

"Though the loss of Faw and control of the Shatt al Arab are a major psychological blow, the Iraqis can probably live with it better than taking the political risks that would flow from the casualties it would have to take to liberate the peninsula," said a western diplomat.



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